

## From Coptic to Arabic in Medieval Egypt<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The question of when and where Egyptian Christians began to disuse the Coptic language and adopt Arabic remains a puzzle. The *Apocalypse of Samuel of Qalamūn* (ASQ) offers interesting hints about the process of language change by referring to the loss of Coptic in church functions. This paper argues that the ASQ represents Christians from the specific region of the Fayyūm and their struggle of identity maintenance that occurred after the Coptic language had generally fallen into disuse. Some scholars have speculated that the ASQ has a Coptic *Vorlage*, even though it is only extant in Arabic. This paper argues that the ASQ may have been originally an Arabic composition, perhaps written as late as the fourteenth century, as a means of connecting the Christian community to the Coptic language at a time when they were unable to access their tradition through Coptic-language texts.

### Keywords

Arab, Arabic, Copt, Coptic, assimilation, arabization, conversion, language change, identity, Egypt, Fayyum

The question of when and where Egyptian Christians began to disuse their Coptic language, and switch to Arabic, remains a puzzle for scholars of medieval Egypt. The phenomenon of the disuse of the Coptic language is a critical link in the interreligious history of Egypt in the period between the Arab takeover (641) and Ottoman control of Egypt (1517). Several

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Christian texts from that period refer to the disuse of the Coptic language, but as of yet, they have eluded scholars' ability to pinpoint dates and locales in which indigenous Egyptian Christians switched from their native language of Coptic to the Arabic language of the dominant population of Islamic Egypt. The process of replacing Coptic speech and writing—with Arabic speech and writing—is a measurable and definable phenomenon; explaining when and how Egyptian Christians disused Coptic and adopted Arabic would provide clues for understanding the social change in medieval Egypt that we often term *arabization*, *assimilation*, and *trends of conversion*. Maged S. A. Mikhail's dissertation suggests that charting social and religious change requires greater attention to specific regions within Egypt:

The question should not simply be 'when did Arabization take place?' but equally important is 'where?' Lack of specificity has been as responsible for the conflicting historiographies as much as the sources themselves. . . . [C]onclusions drawn from any source, narrative or documentary, should not be projected on to the whole of Egypt, but rather qualified by a chronological and geographical context.<sup>2</sup>

In accordance with Mikhail's argument, this essay examines the literary and historic context of one text, relative to the Fayyūm, that is often singled out as evidence of the linguistic arabization of Egypt: the *Apocalypse of Samuel of Qalamūn*.

It is ironic that the Egyptian Christian *Apocalypse of Samuel of Qalamūn*—a text that contains a sustained admonition against replacing the Coptic language with Arabic—is only extant in Arabic-language manuscripts. The *Apocalypse of Samuel of Qalamūn* (ASQ) repeatedly links the disuse of the Coptic language with the loss of Egyptian Christian religious identity. As Leslie MacCoull has argued, the Coptic language fell into disuse “at different times in different contexts,” and the stages of disuse “remain to be charted, and cogent reasons for its death have yet to be brought forward.”<sup>3</sup> Twenty years since those comments were written, it is still the case that “[n]o one has yet been able to account for the death of the Coptic lan-

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<sup>2</sup> Mikhail, “Egypt from Late Antiquity to Early Islam: Copts, Melkites, and Muslims Shaping a New Society” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2004), 130.

<sup>3</sup> MacCoull, “Three Cultures under Arab Rule: The Fate of Coptic,” *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte*, 27 (1985): 64.

guage,”<sup>4</sup> yet the *ASQ* is one of a handful of Egyptian Christian sources that do offer clues about the process of switching from Coptic to Arabic in Egypt.<sup>5</sup> This essay will examine the *ASQ*’s conceptions of the Coptic language as an identity-bearing distinctive of Egyptian Christianity, arguing that these references to the disuse of Coptic—written in Arabic—preserve the mood of Christians who have already become linguistically arabized. This essay argues that the *ASQ* could have been composed originally in Arabic, and as such, it would have enabled Christians of the Fayyūm to access their Coptic heritage via an Arabic text, since they were arabized to the point that they were losing their ability to understand Coptic literature.

### The Problem of Dating Literary References to Coptic Language Change

The most challenging puzzle that scholars face when attempting to chart the disuse of Coptic is the lack of interconnection between the historical sources that provide evidence of language change. With respect to the disuse of Coptic, writers have quoted numerous times the now-famous

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<sup>4</sup> MacCough, “Three Cultures under Arab Rule,” 64.

<sup>5</sup> I use the phrase “disuse of Coptic” as a shorthand for discussing the phenomenon whereby Coptic speakers replaced Coptic with Arabic in their literary productions and especially their everyday speech. It is not accurate to label the Coptic language ‘dead’ while it is currently at least mouthed daily in the Coptic Church’s liturgy. Moreover, Andrew Dalby has recently noted his reluctance to speak of languages as ‘dying,’ since the loss of language is “defined in such different ways” and it is only “[o]ccasionally [that] it may be linked with... the violent death of all current speakers.” He refers to it as “language loss” in the process of being replaced by another language: “More often the last speakers of any language have switched to another which meets their current needs, and occasionally... a little of their former language may be incorporated in their new one.” According to Dalby, “we are all losers” in that process of language replacement. I would argue further that, as long as there are extant textual representations of a language and enthusiasts of those writings, a language is not altogether dead, nor is it lost. Thus, I employ “disuse” to express the neglect of Coptic-language skills, which went hand in hand with an increasing “use” of Arabic by Egyptian Christians in the course of maintaining and producing their culture. See Andrew Dalby, *Language in Danger: The Loss of Linguistic Diversity and the Threat to Our Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), x, xi.

comments attributed to the tenth-century Coptic Bishop Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa' (ca. 905–87), which appear in the early portion of the *Arabic History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* (AHPA).<sup>6</sup> According to one manuscript of the AHPA, Sawirus explained to his readers that he had sought help translating Coptic and Greek into Arabic, since most Egyptians only understood Arabic. He visited “those Christian brothers of whose competence I am aware, and I asked them to help me translate that which we found written in Coptic and Greek into Arabic, which is—today—understood by the people of our time in the provinces of Egypt, most of whom do not speak Coptic and Greek.”<sup>7</sup> Some scholars recognized the harmony between this reference to the disuse of Coptic and another passage, also attributed to Sawirus Ibn al-Muqaffa', in the book *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ*.<sup>8</sup> In this other instance Sawirus (presumably) blames the widespread lack of theological understanding of the Trinity on the loss of the Coptic language. The book *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ* states:

I say that the reason this mystery [of the Trinity] is unavailable (*kitmān*) to believers is their mixing with foreigners (*'ikhṭilāṭuhum bi-'ajānibī*) and the loss of their original Coptic language (*wa li-ḍayā' lughatihim*), through which they knew their doctrine (*madhhabahum*). Eventually, they only seldomly heard mention of the Trinity (*dhakra l-thālūthi*) among them, and the Son of God was only mentioned among them meta-

<sup>6</sup> For instance, see Hany N. Takla, “Copto (Bohairic)-Arabic Manuscripts: Their Role in the Tradition of the Coptic Church,” in *Coptic Studies on the Threshold of a New Millennium: Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Coptic Studies, Leiden, 27 August–2 September 2000*, ed. Mat Immerzeel and Jacques van der Vliet, 2 vols. (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 1:641. See also MacCoull, “Three Cultures under Arab Rule,” 64, 65; and Sidney Griffith, “The *Kitāb Miṣbāḥ al-'Aql* of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa': A Profile of the Christian Creed in Arabic in Tenth Century Egypt,” in *Medieval Encounters*, 2 (1996): 25 n. 46.

<sup>7</sup> B. Evetts, ed. and trans., “History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria I, Saint Mark to Theonas (300),” *Patrologia Orientalis*, 1 (1907): 115; my translation. “asta'ntu bi-man 'a'lamu istiḥqāqahum min al-akhawati l-masīhiyyīn wa sa'ltuhum musā'dati 'ala naqli ma wajadnahu minha bi-l-qalami l-qibṭi wa al-yūnāni ila l-qalami al-'arabi aladhi huwa al-yawma ma'rūfun 'and ahl hadha l-zamān bi aqlimi diyāri miṣri li-'admi l-lisāni l-qibṭi wa l-yūnāni min aktharihim.”

<sup>8</sup> See Khalil Samir, “Un traité inédit de Sawirus Ibn al-Muqaffa' (10<sup>e</sup> siècle): ‘Le Flambeau de l'Intelligence,’” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 41 (1975): 160 n. 2. For a review of the manuscripts of the *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ* and the later editions available in Egypt, see Mark N. Swanson, “The Specifically Egyptian Context of a Coptic Arabic Text: Chapter Nine of the *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ* of Sawirus Ibn al-Muqaffa',” *Medieval Encounters*, 2 (1996): 214–27.

phorically (*'ala sabīli l-majāzī*), but what they mostly hear is, “God is Single, Eternal,”<sup>9</sup> and the rest of this talk (*al-kalām*) which the others [*i.e.*, Muslims] speak. The believers became accustomed to it (*tā'awwada bihi*) and [were] brought up in it, to the extent that the mention of the Son of God is embarrassing for them [*yaṣū'bu 'alayhim*], and they do not know an explanation for Him, nor a meaning.<sup>10</sup>

Taken together, this literary evidence would seem to indicate that the tenth century, in which Sawīrus flourished, was a period of rampant disuse of Coptic, especially since it purports to show an intellectual of Sawīrus's stature seeking out a narrow remnant of the Coptic elite who would be able to translate Coptic into Arabic. Unfortunately, these sources cannot be conclusively attributed to Sawīrus; Johannes den Heijer has shown that it was not Sawīrus who authored the introductory remarks to the *AHPA*, but the comments of the *AHPA* were written by a later redactor, perhaps at the earliest by the deacon Mawhūb Ibn Maṣṣūr Ibn Muffarij (ca. 1025–1100), who lived a century later than Sawīrus.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the phrase referring to the widespread ignorance of Coptic only appears in the later so-called *Vulgate* manuscript of the *AHPA*, dated to the thirteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> “Allaha fardun ṣamadun”. A slight adaptation of Sūrah 112, “allahu 'aḥadun allahu l-ṣamadun”: “God is One, God is Eternal...”

<sup>10</sup> Sawīrus Ibn al-Muqaffā', *Al-durru l-thamīn fī 'idāhi l-dīn* (Cairo: Dar al-Ṭabā'ah al-Qawmiyyah bi-l-faḡālah, 1971), 10; my translation. MS Aya Sofya 2360, containing part of the *Kitāb al-Īdāh*, refers to loss of language without mentioning the word “Coptic.” It is thoughtfully translated by Barbara Roggema, “Muslims as Crypto-Idolaters—A Theme in the Christian Portrayal of Islam in the Near East,” in *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule: Church Life and Scholarship in 'Abbasid Iraq*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 13, 14. The Arabic text (with translation) appears in R. Y. Ebeid and M. J. L. Young, “A Theological Work by Severus ibn al-Muqaffā' from Istanbul: MS Aya Sofya 2360,” *Oriens Christianus*, 61 (1977): 78–85, esp. 80–2. A comment of similar tenor about the disuse of Coptic appears later in *al-Durru l-thamīn fī 'idāh al-dīn* on p. 161; for a translation of that passage, see Griffith, “The *Kitāb Misbāh al-'Aql* of Severus ibn al-Muqaffā',” 25. Also translated in Mikhail, “Egypt from Late Antiquity to Early Islam,” 166.

<sup>11</sup> Den Heijer, “Sawīrus Ibn al-Muqaffā', Mawhūb Ibn Maṣṣūr Ibn Muffarij et la genèse de «l'Histoire des Patriarches d'Alexandrie»,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, 41(1984): 336–47, esp. 339–41; Den Heijer, “Mawhūb Ibn Maṣṣūr Ibn Muffarij et l'Historiographie Copto-Arabe: Étude sur la composition de l'Histoire des Patriarches d'Alexandrie,” *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, no. 513 (Louvain: Peeters, 1989): esp. 81–116; Den Heijer, “Coptic Historiography in the Fāṭimid, Ayyūbid and Early Mamlūk Periods,” *Medieval Encounters*, 2 (1996): 67–98, esp. 72–7.

<sup>12</sup> Den Heijer, “Sawīrus Ibn al-Muqaffā',” 340.

Moreover, Mark Swanson has cast doubt on Sawīrus's authorship of *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ*, concluding that it is likely one of the sources to which Copts are prone, in retrospect, to attribute authorship to Sawīrus, largely because it "is ancient and in Arabic and representative of the faith of the Coptic Orthodox Church."<sup>13</sup> Like the *Vulgate* of the *AHPA*, the earliest manuscript of the *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ*, upon which Swanson relies, dates to the thirteenth century.<sup>14</sup> At this point, scholars can neither connect these literary data with the person Sawīrus Ibn al-Muqaffa' nor date them with certainty.

Up to now, the prospects for dating the *ASQ* have been no better. John Iskander insightfully identified the similarities between the Fāṭimid ruler al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh (985–1021 [r. 996–1021]) and the final Muslim ruler depicted in the *ASQ*'s passage on the end times.<sup>15</sup> As Iskander has noted, the *ASQ* describes the last ruler who will

arise from the hijrah; his name is the name of a prophet, and the number of his name is six hundred sixty-six. Whoever has a heart let him understand: He will be born of two nations, and the earth will tremble in the days of his reign. His clothes are the color of gold, and he is confident in himself. He will send a man to death for a dinar, and there will not be a respite in his days, nor will there be life in his face. He will forget the fear of God and he will not have [fol. 29r] repute before Him. He will not practice the precepts of his father, for he is Ishmaelite, nor the faith of his mother, for she is Frankish.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Swanson, "Our Brother, The Monk Eustathius': A Ninth-Century Syrian Orthodox Theologian Known to Medieval Arabophone Copts," *Coptica*, 1 (2002): 119–40, esp. 122. For a listing of Sawīrus's works as recorded by Michael of Tinnīs (fl. 1051) and Abū l-Barakāt ibn Kabar (1324), see Samir Khalil Samir, "Un traité nouveau de Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffa': La lettre à Abū al-Yumn Quzmān ibn Mīnā," *Parole de l'Orient* 25 (2000): 567–641, esp. 570–5.

<sup>14</sup> Swanson, "The Specifically Egyptian Context," 214 n. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Iskander, "Islamization in Medieval Egypt: The Copto-Arabic 'Apocalypse of Samuel' as a Source for the Social and Religious History of Medieval Copts," *Medieval Encounters*, 4 (1998): 219–27, esp. 221–2. He uses this finding as the underlying evidence for his argument that "conversion to Islam was probably not a major issue for Copts until quite a bit later than" the ninth century and that even at the beginning of the eleventh century, "conversion to Islam was not yet the most pressing issue facing the church" (227). Iskander, "Islamization in Medieval Egypt," 219, 227.

<sup>16</sup> References to the Apocalypse of Samuel follow the foliation of MS Paris Arabic 150, the same manuscript used in the edition by J. Ziadeh, ed. and trans., "L'Apocalypse de

If the common Christian epithet for Muslims—“Ishmaelite”—is read as “Ismāʿīlī,” then this description of a Muslim ruler with an Ismāʿīlī father and a Christian mother coincides with the genealogy of al-Ḥākim. But Jos van Lent has demonstrated that this same comment about a mixed Ishmaelite-Christian genealogy is actually a stock phrase that appears in other Arabic and Coptic apocalypses that unequivocally refer to other rulers who either came well before or after al-Ḥākim.<sup>17</sup> While van Lent grants that the Arabic can be rendered either Ismāʿīlī or Ishmaelite, he rejects Iskander’s argument that this passage dates the drafting of the *ASQ* to the early eleventh century. He concludes that the *ASQ* may have been composed “in its final form at any time between about the second part of the ninth century and the time of copying of its earliest extant version [i.e., MS Paris Arabic 205, 1344 CE<sup>18</sup>].”<sup>19</sup> Thus, establishing the date of the composition of the *ASQ* has been as imprecise as establishing that of the references to the disuse of Coptic attributed to Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ.

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Samuel, supérieur de deir-el-Qalamoun,” *Revue de l’Orient chrétien*, 20 (1915-17), 374-404. See *ASQ* 28v, line 16-29r, line 2.

<sup>17</sup> Van Lent, “The Nineteen Muslim Kings in Coptic Apocalypses,” *Parole de l’Orient*, 25 (2000): 643-93, esp. 664-7. He is correct in his judgment that “the bottom line is that [this passage’s] constituent parts, which originally, in the eighth century, may have served to portray a real caliph, had become *topoi* by the time ApocSam was composed.” Van Lent, “The Nineteen Muslim Kings in Coptic Apocalypses,” 667. In his summary comments on the dating of the *ASQ*, Harald Suermann only notes van Lent’s comment about the interpretation of the word *ismaʿīlī*, overlooking van Lent’s point about the mixed-genealogy topos. See Suermann, “Koptische arabische Apokalypsen,” in *Studies on the Christian Arabic Heritage: In Honour of Father Prof. Dr. Samir Khalil Samir, S.J.*, ed. Rifaat Ebied and Herman Teule, Eastern Christian Studies, no. 5 (Leuven: Peeters, 2004): 35-7.

<sup>18</sup> In the colophon of the contemporaneous Vatican Arabic MS 158 (1357 CE), the scribe Toma ibn Luṭf-Allah mentions that he is a monk in the Monastery of St. Mercurius in Shahrān (Ar.-Shahrān, Cp.-ϣⲁⲣⲁⲛ), which is approximately fifteen miles south of Old Cairo, forty-five miles northeast of Fayyūm (Arsinoe), and seventy-five miles northeast of Qalamūn. For the Colophon, see Angelo Maio, *Scriptorum Veterum Nova Collectio e Vaticanis Codicibus* (Rome: Vatican, 1831), 299. For more on Shahrān, see Stefan Timm, *Das christlich-koptische Ägypten in arabischer Zeit*, 6 vols. (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 1991), 5:2242-8.

<sup>19</sup> Van Lent, “The Nineteen Muslim Kings,” 667.

## A Geographical and Social Context for Understanding Language Change

### *The Literary Background of the ASQ*

However, the search for a date of composition for the *ASQ* is not hopeless. The provenance of the *ASQ* is the distinct region of the Fayyūm, which offers rich literary and documentary sources outside of the *ASQ*<sup>20</sup> that may someday be properly arranged in a way that reveals the sequence of events surrounding the monasteries there and even those trends to which the *ASQ* alludes. The *ASQ* shares a monastic literary heritage with the earlier text written in Coptic titled *The Life of Samuel of Qalamūn (LifeSQ)*.<sup>21</sup> The earlier *LifeSQ* is an hagiographical text that establishes the monastic credentials of Samuel the Confessor (ca. 597–695) in the face of persecution by the Chalcedonian Christians of the seventh century. The Arabic *ASQ* continues that story after the Arab takeover of Egypt. It begins with a review of the Chalcedonian persecutions in summary fashion, and throughout the apocalypse there are clear indications that it and the Coptic *LifeSQ* are complementary texts, both developing the same monastic tradition founded by Samuel in the Fayyūm after his expulsion from Scetis.<sup>22</sup> It is in

<sup>20</sup> See Nabia Abbott, *Monasteries of the Fayyūm* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), 23, for her early assessment—before the Polish excavations of Dayr al-Naqlūn (since 1986)—that “even the published materials that might be of help have not been investigated, let alone exhausted, while unpublished manuscripts, both Coptic and Arabic, scattered in several libraries and museums await the coming of workers.” See also pp. 61 and 65, respectively, for Abbott’s observations on the “pathetic position of the Christians in the Fayyūm” in the thirteenth century, and the lack of sources illuminating the “inner life of the church of the Fayyūm.” See also W. E. Crum’s comment on the problem of paleographic dating for Coptic texts of the Fayyūm, *Coptic Manuscripts Brought from the Fayyum by W.M. Flinders Petrie* (London: David Nutt, 1893), vi.

<sup>21</sup> The *LifeSQ* exists in three editions (Coptic [Sahidic], Ethiopic, and Arabic). For the Sahidic, see Anthony Alcock, ed. and trans., *The Life of Samuel of Kalamun by Isaac the Presbyter* (Warminster, England: Aris and Phillips, 1983). This is based on the Sahidic MS Pierp.Mor. 578. For the Ethiopic, see F. M. Esteves Pereira, ed. and trans., *Vida do Abba Samuel do mosteiro do Kalamon* (Lisbon: n.p., 1894). For the Arabic, see Anthony Alcock, “The Arabic Life of Anbā Samaw’īl of Qalamūn I,” *Le Muséon*, 109 (1996): 321–45; and Alcock, “The Arabic Life of Anbā Samaw’īl of Qalamūn II,” *Le Muséon*, 111 (1998): 377–404. In my references to the *LifeSQ*, I list paragraph number first, followed by page number, based on Alcock’s edition of the Sahidic manuscript.

<sup>22</sup> For an approach that considers the texts as offering a “bioscopic view of the [Arab] conquests,” see Jason R. Zaborowski, “Egyptian Christians Implicating Chalcedonians in



the context of this monastic community that the *ASQ*'s references to the disuse of Coptic gain their identity-bearing significance.

The *ASQ*'s comments on the disuse of Coptic imply an underlying social model of an exclusivistic monastic group. The apocalypse depicts a narrative setting in which the closest disciples of Samuel the Confessor have congregated to hear him relate “the simple sayings about the matters which would come to pass in the land of Egypt in the reign of the Arab *Hijrah*”<sup>23</sup>—*Hijrah* being the Christian codeword for identifying Muslims.<sup>24</sup> Samuel's disciples are said to have posed the question as to “whether their reign would persist over the land of Egypt for a long time or not.”<sup>25</sup> The rest of the apocalypse responds to this question by explaining the Arab takeover of Egypt as being—at first—a respite from the religious persecution of the Chalcedonians. Then the subsequent oppression of the Islamic reign is explained as a “slight discipline by which God will educate the [Christian] people of that generation, for vengeance of their sins that they will have committed. . . .”<sup>26</sup> These sins are violations both of general Christian teachings and, more precisely, of specific norms that distinguish these Christians as being linked to a monastic community of the Fayyūm.<sup>27</sup>

### *Assimilation: Morality and the Disuse of Coptic*

The *ASQ* elaborates on these sins in terms of assimilation of the exclusivist in-group to the alleged immoral practices of the dominant Muslim class. Early in the text, when Samuel finishes explaining the preconquest Chalcedonian persecutions and begins to describe the oppression of the Arab reign, he warns his disciples that only those who are “watchful and guard against imitating the works of the *Hijrah*” will be saved.<sup>28</sup> In this prophecy

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the Arab Takeover of Egypt: The Arabic Apocalypse of Samuel of Qalamūn,” *Oriens Christianus*, 87 (2003): 100–115.

<sup>23</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 20r, lines 6–7.

<sup>24</sup> The basic reference on this concept, which includes a rich bibliography on its currency among Arab Christians, is Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>25</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 20r, lines 13, 14. See also fol. 28v, lines 9–11, for Bishop Gregorius's later restatement of this question.

<sup>26</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 28r, lines 11, 12.

<sup>27</sup> See *ASQ*, fol. 26v, for a summation of the monastic ascetic virtues that the text perceives as being eroded by the sins of laziness (*kasal*) and carnal desires (*shahawāt*).

<sup>28</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 21r, lines 6, 7: “lakin kullu man lahu qalbun mutayaqizun yaḥtafaẓu min 'an yatashabbaha bi-a'māl al-hijrah, fa-takhallaṣa nafsahu.”

*ex eventu*, Samuel purportedly predicts—in the late seventh century—that the Christians of some not-too-distant time will become corrupted by imitation (*tashbīḥ*) of the *Hagarenes*:

Their reign will be far reaching and for a short time they will dwell in peace with the Christians. But after that the Christians will envy them because of their practices, and will eat and drink with them, and play like them, and be merry and commit adultery like them. They will acquire concubines like them and pollute their bodies with polluted, transgressive Hagarene women; they will have sex with men like them; and they will steal and curse like them.<sup>29</sup>

From the Egyptian Christian point of view, this list would seem to include some of the most repulsive sins of greed and self-indulgence. The author of the *ASQ* elaborates on these marks of assimilation further, demonstrating how imitation of the Hagarenes will lead to blasphemy<sup>30</sup> and distract them from the interests of the church.<sup>31</sup> It is in this portion of text that the *ASQ* reveals the identity-shaping value of Coptic to the Qalamūn religious community, for it considers the disuse of Coptic to be the ultimate betrayal of the tradition, the bottom of the slippery slope of assimilation to the *Hagarenes*: “They will do another thing which, if I would tell you about it, your hearts would feel great pain: they will leave behind the beautiful Coptic language by which the Holy Spirit spoke many times from the mouths of our spiritual fathers.”<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, the disuse of Coptic cuts to the heart of the community’s identity. This point in the text where the author introduces the matter of Coptic disuetude is the first time that the priesthood and the monks are implicated in the trend of assimilation. Samuel laments that “even the priests and monks: they will also dare to speak Arabic and be proud of it—and [do] that inside the altar. Woe, then, woe!”<sup>33</sup> According to the *ASQ*, Coptic language serves as the link between the spiritual fathers of Egyptian Christianity<sup>34</sup> and the monks and priests of Qalamūn. The Cop-

<sup>29</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 21r, lines 13–18.

<sup>30</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 21v, lines 3–7, *tajdif*.

<sup>31</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 21v, lines 10 ff.

<sup>32</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 22r, lines 5–9.

<sup>33</sup> *ASQ*, 22r, lines 9–11: “ḥata al-kahanah wa l-ruhbān yajsurū hum ayḍān ’an yatakalamū bi-l’arabī wa yaftakharū bihi wa dhalika dākhil al-haykal al-wīl thumma al-wīl.”

<sup>34</sup> The specific fathers of the Qalamūn tradition are Antony, Makarius, Pachomius, and Shenute, mentioned elsewhere in the text. See *ASQ*, fol. 26v, line 22–27r, line 3: “The Great

tic language is the linchpin binding the exclusivistic monastic community of Samuel to the “authentic” Egyptian monastic tradition.

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The *ASQ* demarcates that tradition along spatio-linguistic lines that converge in the churches and monasteries of Qalamūn. While the *ASQ* continually refers to the “land of Egypt” and personalities and peoples of the wider Mediterranean world,<sup>35</sup> the text’s purported audience is actually the Coptic speakers of Qalamūn and the greater Fayyūm region, who are emblematic of authentic Egyptian Christianity. The church of St. Mary in Qalamūn serves as an *axis mundi* from which God’s grace emanates in concentric bands first to the altars of the churches and the monasteries of Qalamūn, then to the deserts of Qalamūn, and finally to the general region of the Fayyūm.<sup>36</sup> This model can be reconstructed from the *LifeSQ* and the *ASQ*, which both posit a special concord between the Virgin Mary and Samuel.<sup>37</sup> The Virgin Mary appeared to Samuel in the Coptic *LifeSQ*, assuring him that her connection with Bethlehem would be analogous to what she would do in Qalamūn, promising to make Qalamūn her “dwelling-place, where I shall live forever, because I have loved it.”<sup>38</sup> The Arabic *ASQ* also recounts a visitation of the Virgin Mary to Samuel. Samuel cautions his disciples to follow his instructions (*waṣāyā*), lest the Virgin Mary inform her son Jesus about them, “since you are dwelling in her

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Antony, Apa Makarius, Abba Pachomius, and Apa Shenute; those who by their prayers the land of Egypt was settled (*tasta’ maru*); those ones who set down for us the Canons and required them for the monks.” This group is a condensed listing of monastic fathers who are mentioned in the earlier *LifeSQ*: Basil, Gregory, Severus, Antony, Makarius, Pachomius, and Shenute. See *LifeSQ*, 41, 114, 15.

<sup>35</sup> For the *ASQ*’s terminology for identifying Egyptians and other Christians, see Zaborowski, “Egyptian Christians Implicating Chalcedonians,” 113.

<sup>36</sup> Here I am not referring to the architectural features of the church, rather the function that the *LifeSQ* and the *ASQ* assign to the church as a place “[w]here the break-through from [heavenly] plane to [earthly] plane has been effected by a hierophany,” that is, the visitations and constant nurture of the Virgin Mary. See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 36, 63, *passim*.

<sup>37</sup> See Zaborowski, “Egyptian Christians Implicating Chalcedonians,” 107.

<sup>38</sup> *LifeSQ* 25, 100: “ⲁⲓⲱⲡⲉⲗⲁⲥ ⲁⲉ ⲡⲁⲓ ⲡⲉ ⲡⲁⲙⲁⲛⲱⲱⲡⲉ ⲡⲱⲗⲉⲛⲉⲣ ⲛⲁⲟⲩⲱⲣ ⲡⲉⲛⲧⲧⲓ ⲁⲉ ⲁⲓⲟⲩⲁⲱⲧⲓ.”

monasteries.”<sup>39</sup> Just like the Coptic *LifeSQ*, the Arabic *ASQ* states that Mary claims Qalamūn as her abode (*maskanī*) on account of her love for Samuel and “all his children coming after him who cling to his instructions,” that is, to his *waṣāyā*.<sup>40</sup>

The *waṣāyā* are the instructions handed down from the spiritual fathers Antony, Makarius, Pachomius, and Shenute to Samuel, particularly in the Coptic language. The *ASQ* promises that Mary will bless those who uphold the *waṣāyā* while “inhabiting this desert,” “living in [her] monasteries,” and worshipping God “in this holy church.”<sup>41</sup> But at the end of the segment of text outlining the relationship between Mary and the monastic *waṣāyā* of Qalamūn, Samuel relates the final capping instruction for the priests: “Instruct (*awwaṣū*) your children, who will instruct (*yawwaṣū*) whoever comes after them unto the end of the coming ages, [that] no one speak at the altar in the language of the *Hijrah*. For surely whoever does that will merit a curse (*la’ nah*).”<sup>42</sup> Likewise, in other portions of the apocalypse the text states, “whoever dares to speak within the altar in the language of the *Hijrah* has already departed from the commandment of our holy fathers”<sup>43</sup> or “blasphemed the Holy Spirit and the Holy Trinity: Woe to the Christians in that time!”<sup>44</sup> Thus, the disuse of Coptic is considered a taboo, a profanation of the sacred space. And not just any sacred space; it is Qalamūn, the seat of Mary’s blessings for Egypt.

The fact that the *ASQ* warns of punishments for those speaking Arabic at the altar seems to indicate that the text was written at a time when liturgies were no longer solely conducted in Coptic, while also indicating that Coptic had fallen into disuse among the general Christian public in the Fayyūm. The *ASQ* describes a liminal time when Coptic was not fully abandoned, yet not well understood—a time when Arabic was gaining currency, even in liturgical venues, yet the Egyptian Christian tradition

<sup>39</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 27r, lines 11, 12.

<sup>40</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 27r, lines 14, 15. *waṣīyah* / *waṣāyā* is the term used to translate the Greek ἐντολάς in John 15:10: “If you keep my *commandments*, you will remain in my love. . .”

<sup>41</sup> Respectively, *ASQ*, fols. 27r, lines 18, 19 (“*awā’ dat bi-karāmāti kathīratin li-ladhīna yaskunūna hadhihi al-barrīyah*.”); 27r, line 21 (“*yaskunūna fī dayyār al-’adhrā*”); and 27v, line 4 (“*fī hadhihi al-bī’ati l-muqaddisab*”); and *passim* throughout fol. 27v.

<sup>42</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 28r, lines 5–7.

<sup>43</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 23r, lines 9, 10.

<sup>44</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 25v, lines 2, 3.

had not been fully translated into it.<sup>45</sup> The apocalypse does not hint at any available Arabic translations of the holy texts and it implies that Arabic literacy will lead people to non-Christian literature. It states: “Many books of the church will fall into disuse (*tabṭulu kutubun kathīratun*) because there will no longer be [people] interested in books, because their hearts will be inclined towards Arabic books (*al-kutubi l-ʿarabiati*).”<sup>46</sup> The *ASQ*’s prohibitions are specifically aimed at curbing Arabic usage in the church settings, having tacitly ceded the public sphere to Arabic. The text seems to indicate that the widespread ignorance of Coptic among the common Christian population is what compels priests and monks to alter liturgical usage. The *ASQ* deplores the laity’s (apparently common) practice of naming their children with Arabic names and disusing the Coptic names of angels, apostles, prophets, saints, and martyrs.<sup>47</sup> The text claims:

They will forget many of the martyrs in that time because their biographies will fall into disuse (*tabṭulu*)—they will not be found at all. And, when those biographies that do exist are read, it will be the case that many people (*kathīr min al-shaʿb*) will not know what is read, because they will not know the language. Many churches in that time will be dilapidated and empty on the feast nights and Sunday nights as well.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, the text couples Coptic disuse with religious apathy among the Christian masses.

The *ASQ* indicates that the immediate region of the Fayyūm has generally fallen prey to language assimilation. Samuel prophesies that “even Arsinoë—the great city of the Fayyūm—will not understand” the readings<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Mikhail addresses this issue when he grapples with the text’s “apparent contradiction: how could Coptic sermons no longer be understood while the clergy are simultaneously criticized for praying in Arabic?” He offers three solutions: (1) the text is genuinely contradictory, (2) some parishes understood Coptic while others did not, and (3) “delivering” a sermon actually meant reading a patristic or popular homily of some sort—none of which would have been translated into Arabic by this early date.” See Mikhail, “Egypt from Late Antiquity to Early Islam,” 164.

<sup>46</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 22v, lines 3–5.

<sup>47</sup> *ASQ*, fols. 22r, lines 4, 5; 23r, lines 7, 8. Paris Arabic 6147 is a variant in this section, stating that they will abandon the names of angels, martyrs, and saints. Paris Arabic 6147, fol. 23r, lines 14–15.

<sup>48</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 22v, lines 5–9. The Arabic syntax of this section is a bit awkward.

<sup>49</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 22v, lines 12, 13.

and that the “Christian brothers who speak Arabic will revile” the remnant of Coptic-speaking southerners.<sup>50</sup> The mood of the *ASQ* can be considered a turn inward to avoid arabization, since it explains that those who speak “Arabic and are proud of it” will reach the point that “they do not know at all that they are Christians.”<sup>51</sup> Samuel warns his disciples to instruct the coming generations “not to let Christians speak Arabic about these subjects.”<sup>52</sup> But, it is important to recall the irony that the very appearance of the *ASQ* in the Arabic language seems to violate this admonition and validate concerns that they were becoming linguistically arabized at the time of the writing of the apocalypse.

### Bilingualism, Other Fayyūmic Sources, and the Disuse of Coptic

Perhaps it would be useful to consider the possible implications of bilingualism for our understanding of the *ASQ*. When J. Ziadé first published his edition of the *ASQ* (MS Paris Arabic 150), François Nau (1864–1931) commented that the apocalypse was originally “composé en copte au monastère de Qalamoun.”<sup>53</sup> Since then, scholars have thought that the extant Arabic manuscripts are based on a now-missing Coptic *Vorlage*.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 22v, line 19–23r, line 1.

<sup>51</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 22v, lines 18, 19.

<sup>52</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 25r, line 17: “an yuḥḥafaḏū... wa la yada‘ū našrānī yatakallamu l-‘arabiyyata fī hadhihi l-muāḏi‘.”

<sup>53</sup> F. Nau, “Note sur l’Apocalypse de Samuel,” *Revue de l’Orient Chrétien*, 20 (1915–17): 405–7, esp. 405.

<sup>54</sup> See MacCoull, “Three Cultures under Arab Rule,” 66; and Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1997), 288, where he considers the *ASQ* in light of the *Arabic Letter of Pistentius of Qift* (often called “Pseudo-Pistentius” to distinguish it from the earlier Coptic *Life of Pistentius* and to underscore the fact that it could not have been written by Pistentius). Hoyland (and others) takes his cue from Francisco Javier Martínez’s comparison of the *Letter of Pistentius* with the *ASQ*: “In fact, the *Arabic Letter* is an apocalypse closely related, in form and content, to *Apoc. Samuel*.” Martínez, “The King of Rūm and the King of Ethiopia in Medieval Apocalyptic Texts from Egypt,” in *Studia Koptyskie: Prace na Trzeci Miedzynarodowy Kongres Studiow Koptyskich, Warszawa, 20–25 sierpnia 1984 roku*, ed. Włodzimierz Godlewski (Warsaw: PWN, 1990), 250. While common general motifs and some particular *topoi* appear in both texts, nonetheless there are distinct differences between the Arabic styles and the themes employed in the two texts, including the fact that the *Letter of Pistentius* does not refer to the disuse of Coptic. Among

This conclusion makes sense in view of the unrefined Arabic style of the *ASQ* manuscripts and the text's many warnings against supplanting Coptic with Arabic. The text's rhetorical setting is a gathering with Samuel during the late seventh century, and its alleged author is the disciple Apollo, who, we can presume, would not have had the opportunity to gain competence in Arabic in order to write down Samuel's prophecies "for the coming generations."<sup>55</sup> It would seem that at least this rhetorical setting would have to be plausible to the *ASQ*'s audience, and thus some may be inclined to assign to the Ur-text a date that is not too removed from Samuel; and, the earlier the date, the more likely its original was drafted in Coptic. The text's injunctions against speaking Arabic at the altar imply that the priests were still capable of conducting the liturgies in Coptic, and it seems obviously contradictory that such injunctions would be originally issued in Arabic, which is labeled the foreign "language of the *Hijrah*."<sup>56</sup> However, the "original" of the *ASQ* could have been drafted in Arabic and still been plausible to its audience, if its audience still could speak some Coptic within the community and the literate ones among them increasingly read and spoke Arabic. The language of literacy determines the endurance of any text, such as the *ASQ*, but the *ASQ* was probably originally drafted in a context of ascending Arabic literacy among a community that was using

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other differences, the *Letter of Pisentius* has much more of a theological orientation, showing an awareness of Islamic critiques of Christianity by defending the "proper" expression of Trinitarian dogma. Yet, because (1) the historical Pisentius of Qift/Coptos (569–632) was contemporaneous with the historical Samuel (597–695), (2) the texts share some similarities, and (3) the *Letter of Pisentius* bears some marks of a Coptic *Vorlage*, scholars such as Hoyland have concluded that "[b]oth [*Pisentius* and *ASQ*] were written in Coptic and belong to that tradition." Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 288. With regard to the *Letter of Pisentius*, MacCoull has stated that "[c]learly the Arabic is not the original, which, thanks to linguistic clues in the text . . . we can infer was written in Coptic." MacCoull, "The *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Pesyntheus*: Coptic Protest under Islamic Rule," *Coptic Church Review*, 9 (1988): 20. Yet, the linguistic clues to which she refers only demonstrate the *Letter's* awareness of Coptic usage, for example, in speaking statements of faith (e.g., using the Coptic preposition *mn-* to separate the names of the members of the Trinity when speaking of them [*Pisentius*, fol. 41r]) or in referring to Muḥammad by transliterating a Coptic form of his name (*māmādanūs* [*Pisentius*, fol. 49r]). None of these elements of the text (nor MacCoull's comments about ⲙⲙⲙⲟ ["The *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Pesyntheus*," 18]) conclusively reveals a Coptic *Vorlage* for the *Letter of Pisentius*. See also footnote 45.

<sup>55</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 30r, line 9. Of course this argument is facetious, since the *ASQ* must have been written well after the life of Apollo.

<sup>56</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 22r, lines 14, 15.

both Arabic and Coptic colloquially. The core oral tradition informing the text could have been recounted and told, using some Coptic, yet written, preserved, and distributed to other regions in the Arabic language of literacy.

The phenomenon of bilingualism over extended periods of transition from one language to another has been documented for earlier time periods in the Fayyūm. Some ostraca from Medinat Madi (southwest Fayyūm) in the Roman period exhibit strange mixtures of Demotic and Greek. At times the writing will transliterate a Greek word into the Demotic script and at other times insert the Greek word in its own script while using the Demotic article.<sup>57</sup> But it seems that in the Roman period the demand for written Demotic waned and public life offered incentives for at least a meager facility with Greek. Roger Bagnall describes this situation, which is perhaps analogous to what was happening to the audience of the *ASQ*: “For two centuries or so, until the middle of the third century [CE], Egypt witnessed the striking phenomenon of a majority population with no way of recording anything in its own language in writing.”<sup>58</sup>

This was a liminal period, perhaps, wherein literacy in two languages was as important as speaking two languages, if the documents in Demotic were going to be preserved for posterity in the dominant tongue.<sup>59</sup>

### *The ASQ's View of Its Textual Transmission*

Taken at face value, the *ASQ* leaves no room for doubting that some, if not all, of its audience could speak Coptic, since the text assumes that priests

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<sup>57</sup> Penelope Fewster, “Bilingualism in Roman Egypt,” in *Bilingualism in Ancient Society: Language Contact and the Written Text*, ed. J. N. Adams, Marke Janse and Simon Swain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 221–4. For other Demotic source examples from the Fayyūm, see various chapters in A. M. F. W. Verhoogt and S. P. Vleeming, eds., *The Two Faces of Graeco-Roman Egypt: Greek and Demotic and Greek-Demotic Texts and Studies Presented to P.W. Pestman* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

<sup>58</sup> Roger S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 237. Bagnall further indicates that use of Demotic may have endured longer in the Fayyūm than elsewhere, since “after Augustus not a single published Demotic documentary papyrus comes from anywhere except... the Fayyūm.”

<sup>59</sup> See Fewster, “Bilingualism in Roman Egypt,” 227, where she offers an example of lengthy Fayyūmic accounts from the second century that “conclude with the statement that someone wrote them on behalf of the priests, who were illiterate.” Fewster speculates whether the Greek writer translated and scribed the accounts, or whether the priests translated (orally) from their Demotic texts and the literate one simply scribed.



should speak it before the altar and it refers to a remnant of Coptic-speaking southerners.<sup>60</sup> But why should we take it at face value? It is more plausible that the *ASQ* is describing the audience's past in retrospect than that it is capturing its own audience's *Zeitgeist*,<sup>61</sup> or even less likely, its distant future trajectory. Unless medieval Egyptians possessed better powers of prediction than Egyptians do today, it is most likely that the *ASQ* is issuing warnings about community and language changes that had already happened and had little prospect of being reversed. Furthermore, even if its audience could *speak* Coptic, the text offers reason to doubt the audience's *literacy* in Coptic when it mentions the dearth of Coptic-language books in the churches and the inability of readers in the church to understand what they have read:

For those among them who read, there will be no book on the *ambo* (*anbal*), not even the Holy Forty<sup>62</sup> who belong to our Savior. There will be no one to read to the people, nor to preach [it], because they forgot the language and do not understand what they read, nor learn it.<sup>63</sup> Thus, reading (*al-qirā'ah*) also will not even be understood in Arsinoe—the great city of the Fayyūm—and all its districts, whereas the excellent laws of Christ are in their books; those ones strong in the knowledge of God; those ones whose Coptic language is beautiful in their mouths, like the sweetness of honey, a scent among them, like fragrances of perfume in the beauty of their pronunciation of Coptic.<sup>64</sup>

The flowery description of Coptic seems to express a wistful longing for something that has become even more treasured in light of its disuse, showcasing the Fayyūmic use of the language as a museum piece that is out of the ordinary and must be preserved.

The text mentions the act of writing in only two contexts, both ambiguous in their connection to the drafting of the *ASQ* in Arabic. In one case, at the beginning and end of the text, the frame story claims that Samuel of

<sup>60</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 22v, line 19–23r, line 1.

<sup>61</sup> Maged Mikhail suggests that the author is describing his immediate situation. See Mikhail, "Egypt from Late Antiquity to Early Islam," 162.

<sup>62</sup> This is perhaps referring to the Holy Forty-Nine martyrs of the Berber raid of 444, or the Forty Virgins martyred with Saint Damiana: "wa ḥata l-'arba'ini ladhī li-khalāṣinā." The Arabic is very poor here and is open to other interpretations, such as "There will be no one among them who reads a book on the *ambo*, not even the Holy Forty..."

<sup>63</sup> Or, "teach it."

<sup>64</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 22v, lines 9–17.

Qalamūn's disciple Apollo wrote down the sayings of Samuel "for the coming generations, just as the father Apa Samuel entrusted" him.<sup>65</sup> The audience would assume that Apollo was writing Samuel's words in Coptic, but the remarks give no attention to the language of the preservation of the text. The second reference to the act of writing regards the preservation of the religious instructions (*waṣāyā*) in the Church of the Virgin Mary, and the reference is unclear as to exactly what should be written, and whether it must be written in Coptic. While outlining the privileges of inhabiting Mary's abode, the text states: "Who<ever> writes this holy statement (*yak-tubu hadha al-kalām al-muqaddis*) and puts it in the church: who<ever> reads it to benefit the souls of all who hear it, uphold it, do what is prescribed in it, and avoid the crooked way: surely their souls will be saved."<sup>66</sup>

As with the case of the frame story, the logic of the *ASQ* would seem to require such a reading in the church to be in Coptic. But it seems from the immediate context that this "holy statement" stands for the "monastic structure" (*bunyān al-rahbāniyyah*)<sup>67</sup> mentioned several lines above in connection with the teachings of the ancestral monastic fathers of Egypt.<sup>68</sup> Thus, while the text may promote a writing in Coptic, it does not conclusively refer to itself as a Coptic composition.

However, another portion of the text claims that at least the oral (and perhaps written) transmittance of Samuel's instructions should be restricted to Coptic:

And now, I entrust you—my beloved children—and I request from you an urgent request: that you entrust whoever comes after you—unto the completion of the generations—that they guard themselves with the utmost defense, and not let Christians speak in Arabic about these subjects; that is a great doom because many in that time will dare to speak behind the alter in the language of the *Hijrah*.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>65</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 30r, lines 9, 10.

<sup>66</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 27v, lines 7–10. The brackets < > indicate interpretive glosses. The syntax of this section is very poor: "and the Virgin Mary will fulfill his request promptly": "[line 7] alladhī yaktubu hadha l-kalām [line 8] al-muqaddis wa yaḍa'hu fi l-bī'ati yaqra'u fihī li-ribhī l-nufūs li-kulli man yasma'uhu [line 9] wa yaḥtafizu bihi wa ya'malu bi-mā rusima fihī wa yabta'adū [sic] min al-ṭarīqi l-mu'wajjati [line 10] fa-'inna nufūsahu tukhlaṣu."

<sup>67</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 27r, lines 5, 16.

<sup>68</sup> That is, Antony, Makarius, Pachomius, and Shenute.

<sup>69</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 25r, lines 14–19. An interesting variant appears in Mingana Syriac MS 232 (fol. 95r, lines 6, 7), which emphasizes the multi-stepped process of transmitting the account: "[E]ntrust whoever comes after you, and also they shall entrust those coming after

This passage may be indicating a colloquial activity that was presumed to accompany the actual written propagation of the *ASQ*, yet at this point we can observe three things in light of this passage: (1) the seeming irony that the *ASQ* is extant only in Arabic, being spread in Arabic, against which it warns; (2) the written text's lack of self-awareness of this seeming contradiction; and (3) the ambiguous connection between the oral story and the written manuscript preserving it.

### *Bilingualism in the Fayyūm*

Between the eighth and eleventh centuries, Coptic, Greek, and Arabic writing took place side by side for a time in the Fayyūm.<sup>70</sup> It is interesting to note Leslie MacCoull's observation that the "two great [documentary] papyrus finds of the late 1880s" were in Ashmunayn and the Fayyūm. These papyri, written in Coptic, indicate to her that the two regions "appear to have been Coptic language strongholds until quite late."<sup>71</sup> Late, in her opinion, is the beginning of the eleventh century. We can further observe that these are the locales associated with Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa' and the *ASQ*. Sawirus was writing complicated theology exclusively in Arabic in the tenth century. Yet, at a date no later than that, at least some *Muslims* were communicating via Coptic letters between Fuṣṭāṭ and Bawīt (crossing paths with the Fayyūm and al-Ashmunayn). An example of this is British Museum Coptic MS 580: a letter from 'Alī to his son Aḥmad written in

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them, unto the completion of the generations." Paris Arabic MS 6147, fol. 29v, lines 6, 7, focuses on the liturgical use of Arabic, omitting the reference to the transmission of the *ASQ*: "[A]nd not let Christians speak Arabic within the altar, for that is a great doom, because in that time many will dare to speak..."

<sup>70</sup> See MacCoull's analysis of a tenth—twelfth century Egyptian Greek acrostic hymn that employs "pre-made units of thought that are in the Greek language as understood by its user at that time" "Greek Paschal Troparia in MS Paris Copte 129<sup>20</sup>," *Le Muséon*, 117 (2004): 101. It is part of the bilingual Coptic-Greek MS Paris Copte 129<sup>20</sup>. I have not found the provenance of this Paris manuscript. See also, for example, papyrus no. 43 from the Fayyūm in the Flinders Petrie collection in the British Museum. This papyrus (dated sometime between the eighth and tenth centuries) uses Greek in place of Coptic characters, and even the "peculiar Coptic sounds are represented by combinations of the Greek letters." See Crum, *Coptic Manuscripts Brought from the Fayyum by W. M. Flinders Petrie* (London: David Nutt, 1893), 59.

<sup>71</sup> MacCoull, "The Strange Death of Coptic Culture," *Coptic Church Review*, 10, no. 2 (1989): 35–45, esp. 37.

Coptic as early as the ninth century. The letter is concluded with delivery instructions in Arabic. Although the manuscript is legible, W. E. Crum found the Coptic to be so poor that he was unable “to give a summary of its contents.”<sup>72</sup> With regard to another case, Maged Mikhail has noted that the Teshlot Papyri of the mid-eleventh century contain a letter written *in Arabic* from a man named Agathon to his friend Soucine, and a reply written *in Coptic* from Soucine to Agathon. This is evidence that the town of Teshlot, roughly thirteen miles south of Ashmunayn, was a locale of some bilingualism.<sup>73</sup>

Earlier, in the tenth century, it is clear that there were some Copts in the Fayyūm who did not understand Arabic. The University of Chicago Oriental Institute MS A6965, dated 946 CE, is an Arabic land contract documenting sale of property in the Fayyūm. In it, an Egyptian Christian named Marqurah sold the land and “acknowledged his comprehension of [the contract] and his cognizance of it after it had been read to him in Arabic and translated for him (by) Muḥammad.”<sup>74</sup> It was probably translated into Coptic.

Yet by the eleventh century, at least one Coptic text from the Fayyūm displays the practical reason why even a Coptic speaker may opt to draft a text such as the *ASQ* in Arabic. In the marginal note of this eleventh-century Coptic manuscript, a monk has scrawled a message in Coptic about how he had escaped the monasteries of the Fayyūm under heavy persecution from al-Ḥākim (d. 1021) and found refuge in the monastery of St. Makarius in Scetis.<sup>75</sup> As Zoega has noted, the writer mixes and confuses

<sup>72</sup> Crum, *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London: Longmans, 1905), 275. The British Museum collection contains numerous papyri from the Fayyūm written in Arabic and Coptic (and Greek). For instance, see no. 568: one side of the papyrus is a circa ninth-century Arabic writing, while the other is a later Coptic letter. Often, establishing their dates is a problem.

<sup>73</sup> Mikhail, “Egypt from Late Antiquity to Early Islam,” 167. See also MacCoull, “The Teshlot Papyri and the Survival of Documentary Coptic in the Eleventh Century,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 55 (1989): 201–6.

<sup>74</sup> Translated by Abbott, *The Monasteries of the Fayyūm*, 14. The Arabic (p. 7) reads: “fāqirun bi-fahmihi wa ma’rifatihi ba’ad ‘an qara’a ‘alayhi b-al-‘arabiyyati wa tarjama lahu muḥammad.”

<sup>75</sup> The note is dated 1014 CE. Two slightly variant editions of the note are available: Adolphus Hebbelynck and Arnoldus van Lantschoot, *Codices Coptici Vaticani Barberiniani Borgiani Rossiani: Tomus I: Codices Coptici Vaticani* (Vatican City: Bibliotheca Vaticana, 1937), 510; and Georgio Zoega, *Catalogus Codicum Copticorum Manuscriptorum qui in*

three Coptic dialects in this note.<sup>76</sup> The admixture of different Coptic dialects also appears in P.Naqlun 10/95, dated to roughly the same period.<sup>77</sup> If John Iskander is correct in linking the *ASQ* with the reign of al-Ḥākim, this note likewise illustrates the weakened Coptic skills of the monks of the Fayyūm during that period.

### **“Copts?”: Manuscript Evidence of the Term “Copt” in the *ASQ***

Although the *ASQ* could have been drafted originally in Coptic at an earlier date, there are no reasons to reject the possibility of its being originally drafted in Arabic around the time of the oldest extant manuscript, dated 1344.

The fact that the *ASQ* is only extant today in Arabic manuscripts holds more irony for the textual historian than for the Copts themselves. If it seems dissonant that the text could be originally written in the Arabic language around the theme of curbing arabization (even cursing those who use Arabic), it is no less dissonant that an Arabic translation of the *ASQ* would condemn the use of Arabic. Whether the *ASQ* is originally Arabic or a translation of Coptic, the question relevant to the history of language change is the same: How could the Arabic translation (or original) plausibly expect its audience to resist using Arabic when it does not? Why do the Arabic “versions” not exhibit a self-awareness of their dependence on a Coptic original, which could easily be referenced in the frame story of the text? Such a comment in the Arabic renditions, stating that “this text is a translation of the Coptic prophecy,” would only heighten the urgency of heeding the *ASQ*’s warnings against arabization, reinforcing the risk of losing their language altogether. But the Arabic text makes no apology for the language of its own composition, taking it for granted that it is written in Arabic. I think that, generally, the Copts of the text’s original

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*Museo Borgiano* (Rome: Congregation of Propaganda Fide, 1810), no. 54, p. 106. Hugh Evelyn-White translates a portion of it (from Quatramère’s Latin). See Evelyn-White, *The Monasteries of the Wādi ‘n Natrūn*, pt. 2 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1932), 345.

<sup>76</sup> Zoega, *Catalogus*, 105.

<sup>77</sup> See Tomasz Derda and Katarzyna Urbaniak-Walczak, “P. Naqlun Inv. 10/95: Greek Excerpts from a Liturgy with their Coptic Translation,” *Journal of Juristic Papyrology*, 26 (1996): 7–21.

audience—and the Copts of today—would not have found dissonance between the text’s anti-Arabic message and its Arabic composition.

Even when read in the extant Arabic manuscripts of the fourteenth century and later, the references to the Coptic language hold symbolic value for Coptic identity—a symbol reminding Copts that even if they cannot read Coptic, their tradition nonetheless springs from that language, and *not* from Arabic. I want to suggest that as the Coptic communities became increasingly linguistically arabized, the Coptic language increasingly served as an indexical symbol of Coptic Christian identity, similar to the ways other minority communities have been served by their languages. As the language became more confined to its modern liturgical role within the Egyptian church, Coptic became the distinctive of the church, despite the community’s disuse of it in everyday life. The language, as a symbol, linked the Copts with a tradition that they could claim predates the Islamization and arabization of Egypt and validates their religious tradition in response to conversion and assimilation. The language’s identity-shaping significance only grew with the public disuse of that language.

The way that the manuscript tradition of the *ASQ* unfolded seems to provide evidence of the growing importance of *identifying* with the Coptic language, but not necessarily of actually continuing to *speak* with the Coptic language. It is important to note that the earliest manuscripts of the *ASQ* do not refer to the audience as “Copts” at all. The text usually refers to them simply as “Christians” or, occasionally, the “orthodox.” But the following sample passages illustrate how later manuscripts of the *ASQ* inserted the term “Copt,” appearing side by side with the identifier “Christian,” reinforcing Coptic as the symbol of their religious identity: a symbol that they could have taken for granted at a time before the disuse of the language.

### Example A<sup>78</sup>

Paris Arabic 205 (1344 CE), fol. 142v, lines 2–4

...لأنَّ الكبرياءَ تقوي في النصارى ويهزون بكلام المقدسة أنفاس الله

...for arrogance will gain strength among the Christians and they will mock the words of the holy books, the inspiration of God.

<sup>78</sup> Note that the Arabic spellings here follow the spellings in the manuscripts, which are sometimes incorrect.

Vatican Arabic 158 (1357), fol. 119r, lines 10-13; Paris Arabic 150 (1606), fol. 25r, lines 1-3; Mingana Syriac 232 (sixteenth century), fol. 94r, lines 6-11

...لأنَّ الكبرياءَ تقوي كثير في النصارى في تلك الأيام... ويهزوا بكلام الكتب المقدسة التي هي من نفس الله

... for arrogance will gain great strength among the Christians in those days... and they will mock the words of the holy books, which are from the inspiration of God.

Paris Arabic 131 (1440), fol. 79v, lines 11-13

...لأنَّ الكبرياءَ يكبر جداً من النصارى القبط من ذلك الزمان... ويهزوا على الكتب المقدسة الذي هي أنفاس الله

... for arrogance will increase greatly among the Christians, the Copts, from that time... and they will mock the holy books, which are the inspiration of God.

Paris Arabic 6147 (1832), fol. 29r, lines 2-6

...إن الكبرياء في ذلك الزمان تتولى على المسيحيين من الأقباط النصارى... ويتهزوا بكلام الكتب المقدسة التي هي أنفاس الله

... verily, arrogance in that time will overtake the Christians among the Christian Copts... and they will mock the words of the holy books, which are the inspiration of God.

### Example B

Paris Arabic 205, fol. 140r, lines 8-9

...إذ تجدون النصارى يتركون لغتهم الحلوة ويفتخرون بلغة العربية وبأسمائهم

...since you will find the Christians abandoning their beautiful language and being proud of the Arabic language and their [Arabic] names. [Arabic script *sic*]

Vatican Arabic 158, fol. 116v, lines 1-3; Paris Arabic 150, fol. 23r, lines 5, 6; Mingana Syriac 232, fol. 90r, lines 4-6

...إذ تجد النصارى يتركوا لغتهم الحلوة ويفتخروا بلغة العربية وبأسمائهم

...since you will find the Christians abandoning their graceful language and being proud of the Arabic language and their [Arabic] names. [Arabic script *sic*]

Paris Arabic 131, fol. 77r, lines 5-6

...إن يجد نصراني ترك لغته القبطية الحلوة الحسنة واقتخر باللغة العربية وأسماءهم

...he will find a Christian who abandoned his beautiful graceful Coptic language and was proud of the Arabic language and their [Arabic] names.

Paris Arabic 6147, fol. 24v, lines 10–13

... إذ تجدوا النصارى الشعب القبطي الأرثوذكسي في ذلك الزمان يتركوا لغتهم الحلوة ويفتخروا باللغة العربية وبأسمائهم

...since you will find the Christians—the Orthodox Coptic people—in that time abandoning their graceful language and being proud of the Arabic language and their [Arabic] names.

### Concluding Remarks: Speculation about the Thirteenth Century

The manuscript tradition seems to indicate, in the examples above, that as linguistic arabization increased, the need to identify the community with the Coptic language also increased. This use of Coptic to define the community is also evident in much later times when the Coptic language served as an elusive symbol of Egyptian Christian identity. For example, during the run-up to the Egyptian revolution of 1919 the Coptic newspaper *Al-Waṭan* implied that the Copts should reject the Arabic language and in fact that all Egyptians—Muslim and Christian—should study Coptic as a way of connecting with their deepest pharaonic nationalist roots in the face of the British occupation.<sup>79</sup> That argument was put forth in Arabic.

The manuscript evidence above does not rule out the possibility of a Coptic *Vorlage* for the *ASQ*. Nonetheless, if Arabic “translations” of the Coptic were well received by Egyptian Christian audiences, then it is plausible to argue that an Arabic “original” also would have been well received. The *ASQ* achieves a timeless quality by framing the problem of language disuse within the primordial, pre-Islamic legacy of Samuel of Qalamūn. The logic of the text draws the audience into an oral account that Samuel “related in . . . simple sayings about the matters which would come to pass in the land of Egypt in the reign of the Arab *Hijrah*.”<sup>80</sup> An Arabic original composition would, thus, *appear* as a dusted-off manuscript preserving an ancient oral Coptic tradition, and the audience would understand that the

<sup>79</sup> Cited in Barbara L. Carter, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics, 1918–1952* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 97; referring to *Al-Waṭan*, 13 January 1916; and quoted in Muḥammad Sayyid Kailani, *Al-Adab al-Qibṭī Qadīman wa Ḥadīthān* (Cairo: Dar al-Qawmiyyah al-‘Arabiyyah, 1962), 51.

<sup>80</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 20r, lines 4, 5. While the *ASQ* does relate that Apollo wrote down the sayings of Apa Samuel, the manuscripts available to me do not offer details on anyone else involved in the transmission process.



extant written text was only a later chronicle (in Arabic) of the real original event, an oral original (in Coptic), which the monks “heard from the mouth of Saint Apa Samuel.”<sup>81</sup> The audience does not need to imagine *when* or *how* it came from Coptic to Arabic, but more importantly that it came from the foundational, pre-Islamic personality of Apa Samuel. Along with seeing the *ASQ* as a prophecy *ex eventu* sounding the alarm of imminent arabization in a *Sitz im Leben* of “rapid social change,”<sup>82</sup> there is room for considering the text as a prophecy *ex eventu* simply reflecting on the more long-term past of a community already mostly arabized, to summon an attempted revival of Coptic literature, such as that which occurred in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. That period, after all, coincides with the time period of our earliest extant manuscript of the *ASQ*.

Egyptian texts from the thirteenth century in particular may hint at an historical point of widespread language change. On the one hand, this is the period of the *Martyrdom of John of Phanijōit*, written in Bohairic Coptic in 1211. Scholarship on that text mirrors the questions that have been raised about the *ASQ*: scholars have speculated about the possible existence of an *Arabic Vorlage* for the *Coptic* martyrdom, guided partly by the notion that the thirteenth century is too late for a Coptic composition.<sup>83</sup> The martyrdom very well could be an original Coptic composition,<sup>84</sup> and if it is not a translation from Arabic, it is the last known significant literary composition in Coptic. At this point, the martyrdom could conceivably be seen as an end point in Coptic literature, considering it was written in the so-called golden age of Coptic Arabic literature<sup>85</sup> of the thirteenth century. At that time, a number of Copts undertook the drafting of Coptic grammars in Arabic, which can be seen as indicating a need both for

<sup>81</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 30r, lines 3, 4.

<sup>82</sup> Mikhail, “Egypt from Late Antiquity to Early Islam,” 162.

<sup>83</sup> Zaborowski, *The Coptic Martyrdom of John of Phanijōit: Assimilation and Conversion to Islam in Thirteenth-Century Egypt* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2005). See chapter 3 for a discussion of language change and a linguistic analysis of the Coptic text (which is extant in only one manuscript).

<sup>84</sup> Zaborowski, *The Coptic Martyrdom of John of Phanijōit*, 133–53.

<sup>85</sup> See Adel Y. Sidarus, “Medieval Coptic Grammars in Arabic: The Coptic *Muqaddimāt*,” *Journal of Coptic Studies*, 3 (2001): 63–79, esp. 63. See also Sidarus, “Essai sur l’âge d’or de la littérature copte arabe (XIII<sup>e</sup>–XIV<sup>e</sup> siècles),” in *Acts of the Fifth International Congress of Coptic Studies, Washington, 12–15 August, 1992*, ed. David W. Johnson, 2 vols. (Rome: C.I.M., 1993), 2:443–62.

strengthening weak Coptic skills and for translating Coptic into the more prevalent Arabic language. One of those grammarians, al-As'ad ibn al-'Assāl (d. *ante*-1259), also translated the Gospels from Coptic into Arabic in 1252-53, establishing Arabic-language scripture rooted in the Coptic biblical manuscript tradition.<sup>86</sup> As I have shown above, the *ASQ* seems to signal a lack of such Christian literature in Arabic, and certainly does not encourage turning to Arabic literature.

Yet, if the *ASQ* were drafted in Arabic at this time, it would fulfill both purposes of promoting the Coptic language revival of the grammarians as well as providing needed Arabic hagiographical literature that explains what went wrong at an earlier period, helping convey an account of the non-Arabic, non-Islamic roots of the Egyptian Christian church to the arabized Christians. Thus, the *ASQ*'s arabized lay audience would be encouraged to appreciate the Coptic liturgy, even if "many people will not know what is read, because they will not know the language."<sup>87</sup> Likewise, the text's priestly audience would be warned not to "speak at the altar in the language of the *Hijrah*. For whoever does that will merit a curse."<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> For a useful study dealing with the al-'Assāl family, see Wadi Abullif, *Studio su al-Mu'taman Ibn al-'Assāl*, *Studia Orientalia Christiana: Monographiae*, no. 5 (Cairo and Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1997). Abullif discusses al-As'ad's translation of the Gospels and his grammatical work on pp. 92-6, where he includes lists of manuscripts. See also Abullif, "La Traduction des quatre Evangiles d'al-As'ad Ibn al-'Assāl (XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)," *Studia Orientalia Christiana*, 24 (1991): 216-24. See also Sidarus, "Medieval Coptic Grammars," 68, 69. For an overview of Arabic translations of the Bible, see Griffith, "The Gospel in Arabic: An Inquiry into Its Appearance in the First Abbasid Century," *Oriens Christianus*, 69 (1985): 126-67. For a recent checklist of scholarship on the translation of the Bible into Arabic, see Hikmat Kachouh, "The Arabic Versions of the Gospels: A Case Study of John 1.1 and 1.18," in *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2007), 9 n. 1.

<sup>87</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 22v, lines 5-9.

<sup>88</sup> *ASQ*, fol. 28r, lines 5-7.

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